

VZCZCXYZ0012
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHBO #0498/01 3112030
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 072030Z NOV 05
FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9503
INFO RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA 6356
RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS 6730
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ NOV LIMA 2888
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1160
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO 6255
RUEHZP/AMEMBASSY PANAMA 8507
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO 3403
RUEHGL/AMCONSUL GUAYAQUIL 3311
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 010498

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/08/2015

TAGS: PGOV MARR MOPS PHUM SNAR CO

SUBJECT: COLOMBIAN THINK TANK SEEKS TO ADVANCE ELN PEACE
THROUGH US/EU ENGAGEMENT

REF: BOGOTA 10106

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood; reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) The consultative process underway between the National Liberation Army (ELN) and Colombian advisors is unlikely to lead to substantive peace talks with the GOC unless the international community, especially the United States, nudges the parties forward, according to Ideas for Peace (Ideas Para La Paz) Director Sergio Jaramillo in a November 2 meeting with the Ambassador. He probed whether the U.S. (and perhaps the UK on behalf of the EU) would be willing to have a "non-meeting" with ELN spokesperson Galan, to convey the international community's interest in peace and to stress that the process would not be indefinite. The Ambassador emphasized that neither the USG nor the Colombian government was willing to negotiate with terrorists unwilling to renounce terrorist activity. Jaramillo said he would convey to the ELN that abandoning terrorist action now was a critical step to advance any negotiations domestically and internationally. End summary.

ELN Intransigent Despite Dwindling Numbers

¶2. (SBU) On November 2, Ideas Para La Paz Director Sergio Jaramillo briefed the Ambassador on the status of the ELN's "Peace House" project outside Rio Negro, Antioquia. ELN leader Gerardo Antonio Bermudez Sanchez, a.k.a. "Francisco Galan," is participating in discussions with various members of civil society, the private sector, and members of Congress. Five "guarantors" (Grupo de Garantes -- Moritz Akerman, Daniel Garcia-Pena, Alvaro Jimenez, Gustavo Ruiz and Aleja Vargas) support the effort. With the concurrence of the GOC, think tank Ideas Para La Paz is serving as the technical secretariat to the process. Jaramillo told the Ambassador that the ELN's political significance continued to surpass its dwindling size (roughly 3,600). While the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), paramilitary forces, and desertions had worked to reduce the overall ELN rank and file each year, the communities in ELN strongholds remained dedicated to the ELN's social revolution ideology.

Both Galan and the guarantors asserted that the debilitated ELN was ready to get serious about the peace process and use the Peace House as a confidence-building measure towards larger issues.

¶3. (SBU) Jaramillo admitted that the ELN retained more autonomy and internal coherence than many believed. Nevertheless, he was skeptical about the ELN's readiness and willingness to negotiate. He recounted earlier ELN offers to reach a deal, all of which failed to advance past initial stages. He acknowledged that the Peace House initiative did not have any notable advantages over the June 2004-April 2005 Mexican-mediated discussions, which collapsed when the ELN walked away in April.

¶4. (SBU) Jaramillo added that the ELN had become increasingly fragmented as their numbers dwindled. The control of the Central Command over some local fronts was also in doubt. Nonetheless, according to Jaramillo, the ELN believed it needed concessions from the GOC to prove to the rank and file that it had won social improvements for the Colombian people.

Probing for U.S. Involvement

¶5. (C) Jaramillo probed for U.S. willingness (and that of UK on behalf of the EU) to have a role in the process. He asked whether a U.S. official would consider meeting Galan: (1) to convey the international community's interest in peace and that the ELN was still on the radar screen; and (2) to impress upon the ELN that time was running out and they

needed to negotiate. Jaramillo said one encounter with a U.S. official emphasizing these points could make the exercise relevant and increase the chances of forward movement.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador said that the U.S. strongly supported the idea of a serious peace process with the ELN, but the U.S. would not negotiate with active terrorists, nor would it counsel the GOC to do so. He reminded Jaramillo that the GOC had made several good faith offers over the last year -- all rebuffed by the ELN. The GOC's final stand was that it would not negotiate with a group that refused to renounce kidnapping and terrorist attacks during talks. Jaramillo acknowledged the point but said the ELN could not take the risk by unilaterally starting the peace process. The Ambassador countered that neither the GOC nor the United States would condone the ELN's continued terrorist activity while it purported to negotiate peace to "meet the ELN halfway." The ELN must renounce terror and become serious about moving from terrorist activity to the political mainstream. Even if the rank and file caused a rare cease-fire violation, it would be a vast improvement over the current ELN leadership blanket approval of terrorist activities.

¶7. (SBU) Jaramillo said he would tell Galan that a cease-fire would be a necessary step to progress any further. He recognized that the ELN had rejected GOC offers over the last few years because of its unwillingness to negotiate with Uribe. However, the likelihood of a second Uribe term coupled with an increase in attacks against the ELN might persuade them to seek a deal.

Time Running Out

¶8. (SBU) In an aside to the PolCouns, Jaramillo said he doubted the ELN would be able to extend the Peace House discussions past the original December deadline. The GOC seemed reluctant to let the pre-negotiation process drag on, possibly due to the ELN's historic difficulty with negotiations or as a counterbalance to having denied the request by the paramilitaries to extend their demobilizations

past December 31, 2005. In any case, Jaramillo said he sought to make the ELN's dialogues "meaningful" and hoped he could motivate Galan to advance negotiations in time.

WOOD